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SUBJECT: VIETNAM FOOD SECURITY RESEARCH BY STAFFDEL LUSE, SENATE
FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE

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¶1. (U) Summary: Keith Luse, Senior Professional Staff Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, met with Vietnamese officials, scientists, policy makers, and NGO representatives to analyze food security issues and identify partnership opportunities in Vietnam from December 6-11. Vietnamese participants expressed appreciation for US assistance and hope to receive additional support to build partnerships with US universities and research institutions, especially in human resource development at all levels of the agricultural sector and biotech research. Participants stated concerns about rice production and storage, human resource development, and climate change. While Vietnam is well known as the world's second largest rice exporter, gaps remain in its ability to provide safe and sufficient nutrition to all of its population and the agricultural sector needs capacity building at all levels. Luse also met with Vietnamese MFA officials and National Assembly members and discussed bilateral relations and regional issues. End summary.

Policy Makers and Crop Production Officials

¶2. (U) Luse met with representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development's (MARD) Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agricultural and Rural Development (IpSard). He discussed MARD's educational facilities and extension services from the national to the local level. IpSard said current priorities include maintaining agricultural exports, especially rice and coffee, finding full employment for rural labor, and promoting the use of biotechnology. Future concerns include avoiding loss of needed agricultural land to increased industrialization and privatization.

¶3. (U) IpSard said Vietnam would benefit from US assistance in building human resources capacity not only in research and biotechnology, but also in agricultural policy and management. Vietnam also needs assistance in post harvest technology, and although it is the world's second largest rice exporter, it is still lacking in capacity to properly store, label, and market its rice.

¶4. (U) Officials from MARD's Crop Production Department described how MARD assists and supports farmers. Concerns were raised about the effects of climate change on rice production, especially if rising ocean levels would increase the salinization of the Red River and Mekong River Deltas. Officials discussed ways to improve the quality of rice, including developing new saltwater resistant strains and building the use of additional export crops including coffee, peppers, corn, cashews and rubber.

NGO Roundtable and Agricultural Genetics Institute

15. (U) Luse participated in a roundtable with 3 NGOs working in the food sector. The American Red Cross has school feeding and water sanitation programs funded under USDA's Food for Education program, with beneficiaries in Central Vietnam and in ethnic minority areas of Northwest Vietnam. CounterPart International has a USDA Food for Progress grant under which it is offering support to farmers and agricultural workers at the grassroots level in Central Vietnam. OxFam Great Britain has been working in northern Vietnam and the Mekong Delta on food security, including emergency response to disasters and advocacy for farmers.

16. (U) The NGOs noted that while Vietnam exports large amounts of rice, coffee, pepper and cashew, there are several serious vulnerabilities in food security. First, Vietnam is prone to natural disasters such as typhoons, floods, and droughts which negatively impact food crops. Secondly, parts of the population, especially in the Central Highlands, Central Vietnam, and the Northwest, including ethnic minorities, have higher poverty rates and weaker access to sufficient nutrition than urban populations. Third, Vietnam has been listed by the UN as one of the world's most vulnerable countries to Climate Change. Finally, at the grassroots level, many farmers are at a subsistence level and the agricultural extension service is inadequate.

17. (U) Luse emphasized the importance of providing detailed project evaluations to determine which programs are most effective. The USDA-funded projects have detailed reporting requirements, and the NGOs conduct additional external monitoring and evaluations. The USDA programs are concluding, and no additional funds will be available from those sources. Despite repeated efforts by Post to arrange a meeting, World Bank officials in Hanoi were unavailable to discuss food security issues with Luse.

18. (U) At the meeting with the Agricultural Genetics Institute, the
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Director General (DG) said there could be food security problems if the land available for agriculture continues to decline. Different types of crops and crops with different characteristics will be needed to respond to changing conditions. The DG welcomed research and academic partnerships with American universities and thought there would be many topics for joint research, especially in biotechnology.

Food Crop Research Institute and Hanoi Agricultural

University

19. (U) Luse met with the leadership of the Food Crop Research Institute of the Vietnam Academy for Agricultural Sciences located in an agricultural province 70 kilometers north of Hanoi. Scientists have an active research program there focusing on rice, tubers, legumes and vegetables. The institute develops food crops to meet the needs of farmers using traditional and high tech methods such as strains that are drought resistant. One professor said that the GVN maintains a 6 month supply of food stores for emergencies and that because geographic conditions differ regionally, it is unlikely that a massive disaster would wipe out all food crops in the north, center, and south at the same time.

110. (U) Many of the institute's staff have advanced degrees from different countries and would like to have greater exchanges with American universities. One repeatedly mentioned concern was the lack of Vietnamese with sufficient English skills to participate in programs in the United States. The senior leadership at the Biotechnology Institute of Hanoi Agricultural University shared many of the same interests and concerns as their colleagues at the Food Crop Research Institute. Vietnam needs human resource development in the agricultural sector, from local extension workers to national policy makers. They would like to establish more research partnerships with American universities, especially in biotechnology, but have concerns about the English abilities of potential participants.

¶11. (U) On December 11, Luse met with MARD Vice Minister Bui Ba Bong who emphasized the need to upgrade rice production, storage and marketing, ensure biosafety, address climate change and build human resources. The Vice Minister thanked the US for cooperation and support, especially from USDA, and expressed hope for future support from USAID. He said he would like to build more partnerships with US universities and research institutions and was optimistic about the future of biotech in Vietnam.

¶12. (U) The DG of the Vietnam Food Administration of the Ministry of Health provided a detailed briefing of the administrative structure of the food safety system. He said key issues in 2008 were consumer complaints about pesticides in vegetables and problems with fruit preservatives. Many of these concerns proved to be unfounded. Current priorities are the implementation of the GVN decree on Food Safety systems and screening food imports for safety. He requested US further assistance in drafting Food Safety laws.

Meetings with MFA and National Assembly

¶13. (U) MFA and National Assembly representatives separately hosted Luse for dinner. During those meetings, Luse raised issues of concern in the bilateral relationship, including curbs on press freedom, arrests of journalists, and pressure on the Catholic archbishop of Hanoi. He noted the high degree of Senate interest about Vietnam and Senator Lugar's satisfaction with the positive trend of relations in recent years. There was also discussion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade negotiations and Vietnam's application for GSP status.

¶14. (U) On regional issues, Luse said that the North Koreans have shown they trust Vietnam and he encouraged his Vietnamese hosts to contribute to regional stability by sharing their economic reform experience with Pyongyang. He noted that the North Koreans have tried unsuccessfully several times to implement new economic policies. The Vietnamese responded that their interaction with the North Koreans had dropped off earlier in the year and agreed that this might be a result of leadership uncertainty in Pyongyang. Luse and an MFA North Korea expert shared their views on the North Korean political situation and Kim Jong-il. Luse emphasized that both parties in the Senate were concerned about North Korean weapons shipments to Burma and the possibility of nuclear cooperation between those two parties. Luse and his hosts also discussed the US

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relationship with ASEAN and China's regional policies.

¶15. (U) This cable was cleared by Staffdel Luse.

MICHALAK